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ABSTRACT

There are thousands of men and women raising their children without the presence of the other parent. This brief booklet was written to help persons who are faced, or will be faced, with this situation. It begins with some shortened versions of discussions held with single parents and with children of one-parent families. Despite financial and personal setbacks that have resulted from their loss of parent or mate, these people feel that they have made a good adjustment and have succeded in coping with many of the problems associated with "one-parent families." The last part of the booklet summarizes what the problem areas are, suggests ways to obtain help through the initial period of adjustment and difficulty; presents an example of a plan of action; and offers some practical advice on the adoption of sensible attitudes for single parents and their children. (Author/PC)

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One-Parent Families

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Foreword

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There are thousands of men and women raising their children without the other parent. If you are one of these or if you are faced with the possibility of becoming one, this booklet may be of some help to you. It begins with some shortened versions of discussions held with parents, and children of one-parent families. In spite of financial and personal setbacks that resulted from their loss of parent or mate, these people feel that they have made a good adjustment, and have succeeded in coping with many of the problems of being "one-parent families." Perhaps from their "success stories" you will be able to get an idea of how to go about dealing with your own situation.

In the last part of the booklet, you will find some of the points of what these people have had to say; suggestions for ways to get help through the initial period of adjustment and difficulty; an example of a plan of action; and some practical advice on sensible attitudes about yourself and your children.

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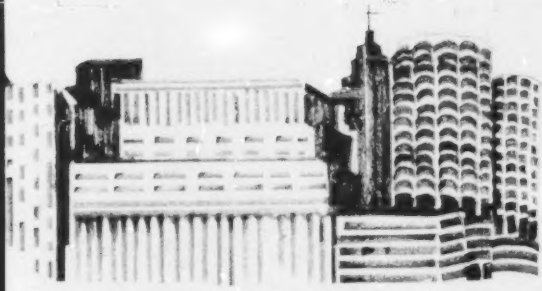
Case #1

I was widowed when I was 26, and left with three children. Kevin was 2 months old, Joanne was 3, and Shirley had just started school and was 6. We'd just moved to Chicago a month before my husband died, and I didn't know anyone. I was lonely, depressed and felt sorry for myself. For the first few months, I moped around the house—barely paid any attention to the kids except to go through the motions of feeding them and taking care of them. I just couldn't seem to get myself together. Here I was in a strange city, with three small children, and the little money my husband left was running out fast.

Well, one day I was down at the laundromat, sitting there waiting for the wash to dry and thinking about how it had been before Bob died, and how on earth I was going to raise those kids by myself. I felt I just couldn't face the future, and was almost on the verge of tears. Then this woman came over and asked me if I had some change for the machines. She was real nice and friendly, and I guess she could see I was at the end of my rope. We got to talking and somehow it came out about Bob's death and all. Then she told me her husband had run off and left her with six kids a couple of years ago, and I thought, "Wow, she's worse off than I am," and I really felt sorry for her. But, she didn't feel that way. She felt she had made a pretty good job of handling things without him. So I asked her how she did it. Maybe what worked for her could work for me.

It didn't sound easy, but I knew I had to do something soon, so I decided to take her advice. Like she said, keep smiling and go to see everybody who might help. Well, I didn't always smile. At first I was scared, but I forced myself to go to lots of agencies and talk to a lot of people. Some places, they told me I didn't qualify for their services, because I hadn't been in the area long enough, but finally the Public



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Case Histories of One-Parent Families Who "Made-it"

Assistance helped me to get ADC (Aid to Dependent Children), and a church nearby took my two youngest ones into their day care center. That was a big help because, with the kids taken care of, I could go look for a job. I wasn't trained to do anything, but the employment office found a job for me waiting tables. The tips were good, and so were the hours. I could be with my children when they were home from school, and I started to take more interest in them. I guess I just hadn't realized before how rough it was on them without their father, and with a mother who could only think about how much she was suffering. I gave them a lot of love and attention, and tried to comfort them about losing their dad.

Things were going pretty good for us, but I was still lonely for companionship. I talked to the woman I worked for at the restaurant about it, and she invited me to join her bowling team. I'm still not much of a bowler, but I have fun, and I've made some good friends.

I've even joined the PTA at Shirley's school because she wanted her teachers to meet me. At first I went just to please her, but I really enjoy it now. And, would you believe it, last week I was elected chairman of the Ways and Means Committee.

It seems that the happier I am with myself and my life, the happier my children are. When I look back to four years ago, I'm amazed at how much I have accomplished for myself and for my children. The kids are doing well in school, and the future is looking brighter all the time. Oh, we have our ups and downs, but the older the kids get, the more they realize that we all have to work together. And we've become a very close family because of that.

I'd say there are several things you have to do when you are left to raise your children alone. First, try to stop feeling sorry for yourself, and that things are hopeless. Realize that the children need you more now than ever before. Make yourself get out and talk with people. Ask for their advice and help. And get help from any agency you can find. Most of all, don't give up. Keep working at it, and anyone can raise kids by themselves if they have to, and do a good job, and have some fun, too.

Case #2

There are five kids in our family—my oldest brother Paul is 16; then there's me, I'm 15; and then Gerald, 10; Dell is 6; and Baby Reggie is 3. We really have *two* parents, but Daddy isn't with us. Three years ago he got hurt in a car accident, and he couldn't work for quite a while. Momma was having Reggie, so she wasn't working either. When he was born, he was real sick and cried a lot, but we couldn't afford a doctor. Daddy felt bad because he couldn't get steady

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work until his back got better, and there wasn't enough money to feed and clothe us all, and pay for doctor bills, even though Momma was back at her job right after the baby was born. Things were going from bad to worse.

Then one night we got a call from the police and Momma got all upset and she had to go down to the station. We kids were real scared, but she wouldn't tell us anything when she got back. She just kept crying. But I found out about it on the radio. Daddy had been arrested holding up a store with another man. He got sent to prison, and that's why he isn't with us now. The kids in the neighborhood teased us about it, but we knew why he did it. No, I don't think what he did was right, but he loved his family and he was very desperate.

Well, after he went to prison, Momma wouldn't file for assistance. She was too proud; so she took another job at night, and we hardly ever saw her. When we did, she was real grouchy, and she yelled at us a lot, especially if we talked about Daddy. Paul and I had to take care of the house and the other kids all the time. We didn't have time to do anything else. Baby Reggie was worse, and Paul and I were so tired most of the time that we began to resent all the responsibility.

Pretty soon, Paul got to running with some kids that were into drugs, and I had to do his share of the work at home. When Momma found out, she got so mad at him, they had a bad fight, and Momma hit him. That night Paul ran out of the house and he didn't come back.

About a week later, the police busted a house full of kids who were using dope, and Paul was one of them. Momma had to go down to the station again, and she was furious. Anyhow, Paul was put on probation because it was his first offense. When he came home, Momma was going to throw him out, but we talked her out of it. You see, she just didn't realize how we kids felt. We understood about Daddy, and why he did what he did, and we weren't ashamed of him. We told her she should stop working so much, and worrying herself to death trying to make things up to us. We all needed her at home. I needed some time to myself, the little kids needed her, and the baby just had to have some medical treatments. Paul said he thought his probation officer might be able to help. Well we were all crying by then, and Momma put her arms around us, and said she would swallow her pride and ask for help.

So, next time Paul had to report to the probation officer, we all went along, and Momma told him about how she needed some help. First off, he helped her to file for assistance that you can get if your husband is in prison. Then he told her how she could get medical services for the baby, and that the Department of Corrections would work it out with her. Another really good thing was that they had a volunteer program, and they assigned Mr. Norton to work with our family. I guess you could say he's a temporary father for us. He visits us, and finds out just where we need help, and then he gets us to the right agency.

Well, things didn't start happening right away, but after a while Mr. Norton got Baby Reggie into a Comprehensive Child Care Clinic, and we found out he had Muscular Dystrophy. They started treatments right away.

Then, Momma thought it would be better for Paul if we moved to another neighborhood, so he wouldn't be around that crowd anymore. So Mr. Norton helped us find a small apartment that was near a pool and a park, and for the first time, we kids had someplace to play that wasn't in the streets.

Paul really likes it and Mr.

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Norton talked him into taking the lifesaving course this year, and now he has a summer job at the pool.

With Momma home I still help her with the house and the kids, but I have some time for friends.

Gerald is in a program that's sponsored by a Lion's Club, and he plays ball and goes to a summer camp.

Dell's real quiet and very shy, but she seems to be making friends at the pool and at school. She likes Mr. Norton, and he has been bringing her books which they read together.

The baby is doing better. He can walk with leg braces, and he's much happier having Momma around.

So you can see, we're getting along alright. Life isn't perfect, but it's better. And when Daddy comes home, I think he'll say that Momma's done a good job.

All I can say about raising kids alone is don't cut your kids off. They love you and need you, and they can probably help you a whole lot. Don't be too proud to ask for help. Being the only parent is a rough job, and you need all the help you can get.

Case #3

Well, my wife was committed to a mental institution after we had been married 8 years. She's still there, and the doctors don't hold out much hope.

Anyway, there is just Margo and me now. She still idolizes her mother, and talks about her a lot even though she hasn't seen her in over 2 years. I don't have any thoughts about trying to work it out so I can re-marry. I still love my wife and I keep hoping the doctors will cure her so she can come home someday. But I got to worrying about Margo not having a woman around, but she told me she loved her mommy and didn't want anyone to take her place. Margo is 10 now. I think I'm a pretty good father, and I think Margo would say so too. We do a

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lot of things together like take long walks, go shopping, and see a movie. Sometimes in the summer we do some fishing, and maybe rent a canoe. We get along very well together and she always talks to me about her problems and I listen and try to help. I tried to be a mother for her too. I taught her something about cooking, and cleaning and how to do housework, but that just wasn't enough.

She needed what some people call a "mother-figure," to be with women she liked and admired, and not just the teachers in school. I think I worked this out very well. Margo has always wanted to take piano lessons, but I didn't think I could afford them. First chance I got, I asked her teacher where she could go to take lessons outside of school that wouldn't cost too much. She suggested I go to the local Youth Center and find out what they offered. They had music lessons for children and we got Margo started as soon as they had an opening. She's taking piano from Mrs. Martin who has really taken an interest in Margo. She says Margo has a lot of talent. I went to a recital at the center about a month ago and was I surprised! Margo was very good. She likes Mrs. Martin and someday hopes to be able to play as well as she does. Sometimes Mrs. Martin invites her to her house and she has taught Margo to sew a few little outfits for herself.

I also got her into the YWCA right near our apartment. It's only about $18.00 a year. She enjoys swimming and has gotten to be good friends with Laura her swimming coach. She's joined the Photography Club and is all set to go to the YW

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Camp for six weeks this summer.

If you ask me how to get some help raising a girl or girls without a mother, I'd say go out and find what's available in your community. I'd say it's almost always there, if you get out and look for it.

Case #4

I don't want to go into a lot of detail about what happened between Harry and me. Just let it go that we didn't make it right from the beginning. We fought everyday, and some nights too. We had two children right in the first two years, and we stayed together another five. But it was bad most of the time. I was a wreck, he was a wreck, and the kids were crying half the time. Anyway, it was good that we broke up. The kids and I had a rough time in the beginning, but we're okay now.

I made up my mind as soon as Harry moved out that life was going to be better for the kids. I don't believe in sitting around crying and feeling sorry for myself. Harry sent us a hundred a month under the settlement, and he still sends it, so that helps pay the rent.

Anyway, you want to know how we worked it out? Okay. I asked Harry's mother if she would keep the children for a couple weeks and she said she'd love to. She's been a lot of help and very understanding. Then I went out and visited my sister and her husband just to get some rest. But, I got more than that. We talked, and talked. I poured it all out, and they were just great. I think that's an important part of these kinds of problems. You have to find people you can talk with, people who really care about you—a relative maybe, or just a good friend. When you talk like this, I mean a lot of serious talk, your mind and their minds get working on the problems, and soon you get a pretty good idea of what you have got to do and how to go about it.

My sister has her own beauty parlor and makes real good money at it. So part of the two weeks I was there I went down to her shop and helped out—shampooing hair and keeping things straight. When I got back home, I knew what I wanted to do and started on a plan of action right away.

First I asked Harry's folks if the kids and I could stay with them for a few months, so I could give up the apartment and use the money I got from Harry to go to school to learn hairdressing. They not only agreed, but they were so glad that I had turned to them. They wanted to help us in any way they could.

Then I enrolled in a good cosmetology school where they let me pay my tuition in monthly installments and I found a job working evenings as a shampoo girl. The pay wasn't great, but I got tips too, and I could afford to buy my uniforms and equipment, and still have a little money left over for my own personal expenses.

Anyway, about the kids. You never saw such an improvement when we began to have some peace and quiet together. The constant hassle between Harry and me was the worst thing for the children. When we broke up, Billy was 6, and was still sucking his thumb, even though Harry used to whack him pretty hard for it. He used to get these terrible headaches, and he'd bang his head against the wall, and scare the daylights out of me. Ellen was about 7, and was always in trouble at school. She couldn't get along with the other kids, her grades were poor, and I was even beginning to think she might be mentally retarded.

With Harry out of our lives, the difference was like night and day. Even though I was going to

school and working most of the time, I spent a lot of time just being close to them. Some nights, I'd be so tired when I got home late from the shop that the kids and I would fall asleep cuddled up to each other on the living room couch. You know, I think that helped. Maybe it wasn't such a good idea for little kids to stay up so late, but I think it was the first real affection the children had from me. Sometimes if I wasn't too tired, I'd read stories to them. One result of this was the kids started to take an interest in books, and Ellen began getting better in her school work.

I talked to them a lot about their dad and me, because Billy especially felt bad that his dad had walked out on us. I told them it wasn't their fault: it wasn't anybody's fault--just that Daddy and Mommy were very unhappy together and it was better for everyone if we lived apart. As young as they were, they tried hard to understand and after a while they came to accept things.

When I finished school, I had worked so hard that I passed my tests with flying colors and got my license. I went to work in a real nice little shop and the kids and I moved into a small apartment of our own. It wasn't easy at first, but I still had Harry's folks to look after the children after school. Then I got a break, and I guess a little luck helps. The shop where I worked was run by an older couple. They liked me, and I was always willing to work extra. Anyway, they decided to retire and go to Florida. They made a deal with me and arranged it so I could buy the shop over a period of five years. It's my place now, and I'm doing pretty good. Both my kids are happier and healthier.

Ellen's doing so well in school that now she never brings home anything less than a B. She has become very outgoing and popular with her friends and she's a real help to me at home.

Billy's headaches are gone. I was worried about him being a momma's boy for a while. I feel that a boy needs a father to help make a man out of him, if it's the right father. Well, I went to work on that problem too and I thought maybe sports was the answer. He wasn't very interested at first, but I asked him at least to try. Now he's crazy about sports. We went through Little League and Babe Ruth League and his coaches have all liked Billy. They say he's a good athlete. He tried out the Cub Scouts and liked that but didn't want to go on to Boy Scouts, so I let that drop. Last winter he worked at the Boys' Club taking care of equipment, made some money and got to be good friends with the basketball coach, who Billy thinks is the greatest guy in the world. This summer he has a job lined up for Billy, helping with the summer playground program. Billy hopes to go to college on a basketball scholarship. I told him maybe that's the only way he'll get there, but I know he'll make it.

I know the kids are growing up, but in some ways we get closer to each other all the time. They appreciate how hard it's been to get us where we are now, and I'm proud of the way they trust and respect me.

Do I think I've been successful? Sure I do. I've come from nothing to owning a small business. Something that would probably never happened if Harry had stayed. I've come from a two-parent family that was miserable to a happy home. Maybe we're exceptions, but I don't think so. I know other people who are making it as families with only one parent, and I think if all the facts were in, the kids are better off, at least in cases like mine where the parents should never have hooked up with each other in the first place.

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Things to do that may be helpful

From these and other one-parent "success stories," certain fairly common threads appear. If you are an only parent, or are about to become one, you and the children involved may benefit from the trials, experiences, and good results of others. For example:

Seek Help During the Initial Period of Adjustment and Difficulty

The loss of a mate seldom occurs without some degree of shock, or emotional upheaval. No matter how well prepared a person might be for the loss, evidently when it happens the remaining partner must nevertheless go through a difficult adjustment period at the beginning.

This is the time to begin getting help. If there are relatives nearby, they may be pleased to be consulted, and hurt if they are not asked to help. Sometimes, of course, they are miles away, but, if it's possible, a visit may be worthwhile. On the other hand, in some instances, for a variety of reasons you may not want to turn to relatives. How about friends? The chance to talk the whole thing out, and to think it all through, with a trusted friend is apparently a first important step—not only to a re-adjustment, but to the development of a plan of action.

In some instances there may be no relatives and no friends, or their help may not be wanted or useful. How about local institutions whose whole purpose in life is to be helpful and supportive? Many church leaders get their greatest satisfaction from the opportunities they have to help in family crises. In many cases it is not necessary either to be a member of the church, or even of the same religion, for the clergy to take an active and effective interest in helping a local family to solve its problems.

Then there are the local family-help institutes, such as the Community Chest or Red Feather agencies, the city social services or welfare agency, mental health agency, veterans administrations, and others. Most have professional family counselors available to listen and advise. They are also equipped to help meet emergency housing, food, clothing and money problems.

However, you may find that you do not qualify for help from public agencies for various reasons. Don't resign yourself to it. Keep trying. There are some private agencies that may help, such as the Jaycees, Lion's Club, Knights of Columbus. Call or visit every one you can find. If they can't help, ask if they can suggest somewhere else.

Whatever help is needed should certainly be sought, and accepted without hesistance or embarrassment. Help goes a long way toward easing the physical, financial and emotional burdens. But perhaps the greatest comfort may lay in knowing the simple fact that the adjustment period will pass, as it has for thousands of others faced with similar situations. And with its passing, the parent should enter the next phase with confidence, and with a plan.

Develop a Plan

Plans of course are made to be changed. But having a plan creates confidence in the future, which is so important to those who have experienced a sudden break with the past.

While plans can exist in the mind only, they are far more real and easier to follow if they are put in writing. There is no one way to make and write up a plan. However, one good way is to write down each major problem being faced and under it what one plans to do to solve the problem.

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For example, a plan might look something like this:

Money:

(1) Cut expenses:
- (a) Get a smaller apartment
- (b) Sell car and pay off all monthly installment bills

(2) Get more:
- (a) Apply for Aid to Dependent Children
- (b) Go see Veterans Administration people
- (c) Get out of retail clerking and into secretarial work; find out about adult education classes at night in typing and shorthand

Health:

- (a) Sign up for a group health plan at work
- (b) See doctor about Billy's headaches

Recreation:

- (a) Join *Parents Without Partners*
- (b) Get Annie into YWCA program
- (c) Visit City Department of Recreation and find out what they recommend for Johnnie that will keep him busy and happy during after-school hours, and until I get home from work.
- (d) Invite a few friends for the coming holiday

The above example is, of course, over-simplified, but it does show the general nature of a simple but helpful plan. As these items are accomplished, new items can be added to the checklist. It is surprising how much better you can rest and gain self-assurance if there is a plan, and you are making progress in working at it.

Consider the Children

Consider the children's needs, their concerns, and their fears. While you have a difficult adjustment to make, the children may have an even more painful experience to go through, particularly if they were quiet fond of the partner who is gone or who will not often be with them.

When children lose a parent, for whatever reason, they need help to be able to understand and deal with the loss. If it's at all possible to prepare them for the departure of the other parent before it happens, do so. But if not, give them the facts simply and honestly, with love and reassurance. You'll feel better about the situation if you can help *them* to understand and accept it.

Don't wait for them to ask questions. You know your children probably better than anyone else does. Use your good judgment and

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find times when you think your children might need to talk about their loss. Sometimes it's hard to see a situation clearly when you've been involved in it, so make an effort to be straightforward and present things as truthfully as you can.

Of course there are times when the complete truth about the loss of the parent may be painful or embarrassing for the children. An extreme example might be a father who was killed in an attempted holdup. In such a case, you should still tell the truth, but without going into any great detail, and simply explaining that their father made a mistake. You really can't successfully conceal things from children for very long. They will hear things from other sources, and children talk among themselves. Children will trust and respect you more if you are honest with them.

If parents are divorced, neither one should try to "put down" the other to the children. It's just not fair to children to use them as a means of getting back at the other parent.

Try to provide the children with substitute mother or father "figures." There are many dedicated people in sports, volunteer programs and public and private agencies who can help to see that your children grow up experiencing both male and female adult companionship and leadership.

Make sure that the children's important needs are met. This can provide needed activity, satisfaction, and gratification to the parent. You won't find yourself sitting around, worrying and fretting if you are working hard and effectively to make the best possible arrangements and circumstances for your children and yourself. And, the important things that you are able to achieve can give you a real boost at this point in time.

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Be fair to yourself

You're a person too, and you have needs. While you should consider your children's needs, you should also consider your own needs—for recreation, assistance, companionship, and comfort. Let your children share in your problems, and in solving them. If you explain things to your children honestly and with love, they will most likely understand and want to help. Often, when there is no number two parent, the children may try harder to behave, to please, and to be a source of help and comfort to the remaining parent.

Be fair to yourself. If the loss of a mate is caused by death, don't *glorify* that parent to the children. Certainly, he or she had their good points and may have been outstanding people. But if children grow to *worship* a dead parent, they may never be able to accept a substitute for that parent. Remember, your life must go on, and for your own happiness and the good of your childern, you may decide to marry again. Your new mate could have a hard time competing with the image of a perfect parent.

Most of all, take good care of *yourself*. The loss of a mate may be a shock for you, but it's not the end for you. Make an effort to get out and look for help, advice, recreation, and companionship. Force yourself if you have to. Your children need you and you can be more helpful to them the more you help yourself.

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